

I Am Somebody!

Mark 1:4-11

I suspect that, having made it to January 7, you would say that you have successfully survived the holidays. True? The celebration of Christmas; then the New Year; finally, Epiphany, which for many has become the Feast of Taking Down the Decorations!. Today I want to suggest that there is one more holiday we should be observing — this day, the one the liturgical calendar designates to remember the Baptism of the Lord.

If the witness of scripture is to be taken seriously, this day must be even more important than those others. After all, only Matthew and Luke record anything about Jesus' birth, but all four gospels report Christ baptism, plus Acts and Romans. In fact, in centuries past the church did celebrate this day even more than the days remembering the Christ birth, but we have drifted away from that practice. Because, in the process, we have relegated to minor importance an event that, when properly understood, can give us a sense of enthusiasm, encouragement, and absolute joy.

Think about the scene for a moment. We are down by the riverside of the Jordan. There is a throng of people from all walks of life who have made this mini pilgrimage into the countryside. They have come to see an itinerant preacher who is more than a passing strange — a coarse camel's hair tunic with a leather belt around his waist, the uniform of a prophet since the days of Elijah. It was longing and anticipation that brought this mass of people out — there was a sense that something was missing in their walk with God, so they were ready to listen to a new voice.

And this is a powerful voice: "You pack of snakes! Who warned you to run from the anger of God that is coming on you? Clean up your act! And do not presume to rely on that fact that you are Israelites — God's chosen people — to save you. Get right and do right." The crowds asked what to do. He responded, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Tax collectors were told, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers were instructed, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages." It was a message that affirmed what they already knew: if they would be right with God, they had to be right with not only God, but God's children as well. Then as a sign of their commitment to repentance and a new way of living, they made their way down into the river, allowed John to "bury" their old ways in the water in baptism, and raise them to a better life. It is a neat ceremony with wonderful symbolism. And in the hands of a dynamic personality... so forceful and impressive that some were led to think that John was the promised Messiah finally come. He debunked that notion out of hand: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Then one day it happened... Jesus. The request for baptism. John's initial reluctance, then acquiescence. Finally, the dramatic climax. As our lesson has it, "As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." What an image! It is as if God is confined to heaven at this fantastic moment and in euphoric frustration rips and tears the very fabric of the universe to lay claim upon the son. It is a cosmic yes. It is love spilling out, the cup overflowing. Not celebrating the conclusion of a work-well-done, but before anything was done, and now about to embark on his ministry. This changed everything! Jesus' baptism ushered in a new baptism.

Christian baptism became not just a washing away of sin, as John's baptism was, but the baptism that brings the power of the Holy Spirit and a special relationship with God. Why? For no reason other than God chooses to do it. That is worth a holiday in my book.

Perhaps we should be used to this by now, but once more, all our high and holy religious expectations are trashed. It started with the ruler of the entire universe entering this world. As an utterly helpless infant. The king of creation being born among the animals. As life went on, his best friends. The down and dirty, the outcasts, those on life's fringes. And, of course, at the end of it all, he dies. Then three days later, surprise! Why should we be startled when we learn that God loves us for no more reason than good parents do: just because.

This is only half of the message from Jesus' baptism and our own...we are loved. Most folks understand that, and that is why they get all warm and fuzzy when it comes to presenting their little ones for the sacrament of Baptism. But there is

another half, and it is this: we have work to do. Remember, this happened at the start of Jesus' work. This was his commissioning service. Now, over twenty centuries later, when someone is baptized in the church (infants or adults), it is no different. There is surely the affirmation of God's incredible and unconditional love and a commissioning to service in the name of Jesus Christ. That is why we take so seriously the promises that new disciples make, or their parents make on their behalf — to live the Christian faith, to teach that faith to the children. We even go for extra help: we ask the congregation, "Do you, who witness and celebrate this sacrament, promise your love, support, and care to the one about to be baptized as they grow in Christ? New disciples have work to do, and they will need all the help they can get.

Both of the elements are important: the affirmation of affection and the proclamation of purpose. Lacking one or the other, we are incomplete.

One of my cyber-friends wrote, "I think of the story that appeared a few years ago in the midst of the upheaval in the former Soviet Union about the fact that Gorbachev's grandmother had had him baptized as an infant, and what that meant as far as his willingness to see and do things differently. I think of the conversion and baptism of the former slave trader, John Newton, and his ministry of healing and grace which continues through his hymns. I think of how important Luther's remembrance that 'I am baptized' was to him in moments of trial and despair... I will be honest. I tremble and grow weak when I do baptisms... and I weep. Not because of some cute-little-baby but because I think it is the most radical and dangerous thing I do. And maybe because it is so radical, so dangerous, so threatening, that people either flee the church as they get older, or they weep when we have the opportunity to reaffirm our baptismal vows."

One of our most eloquent writers has asked, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?"

The baptism of the Lord was a big deal, and much bigger than we have given it credit for in its implications for you and me. Perhaps if we celebrated this day as a holiday... a holy day... we might reclaim the importance of the sacrament. After all, what we do in those sacred moments at the font has the potential for unleashing incredible power. The message is that you are loved, and you have a purpose; that combination makes you very special.

You are all familiar with the Rev. Jesse Jackson. No matter what folks think of Jesse's politics, most everyone will agree that he is an incredible speaker. Jesse speaks in many different settings, and one of those he enjoys the most is school auditoriums — he loves addressing students, particularly those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, to give them a sense of their own worth, a new self-esteem, and a vision of a better future. Some years ago, he began concluding his speeches by having the youngsters respond to his urgings with a litany of self-affirmation. He would say something or ask some question and the kids would respond, "I am somebody!" Over and over again, the youngsters would be asked about themselves and the response would be, "I am somebody." By the time Jesse would be done, those students would be positively bellowing, "I am somebody," and they would leave with a sense of worth that, for many, would be brand new.

The message of your baptism and my baptism is that, in God's grand scheme of things, I am somebody... you are somebody.

At its heart Baptism teaches me that, in spite of all my fears and failures, any worry and wonder, once and for all, in the eyes of the God of all the universe, I can say that I am somebody! You too as the children of God can say, I am Somebody!

Amen!